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Higher Education Institutions

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Entrepreneurship Education: Insights into Students' Learning Experience

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship education is emerging as an important field that it is timely to closely examine the learning experiences of individuals who are immersed in a formal curriculum to inculcate entrepreneurship. There is a lack of insights into how the teaching methods adopted in the top-down approach affect students' learning experiences. This paper adopts a case study approach in investigating an event organised by undergraduates at a Malaysian public university as universities in the local context heed the call to produce more entrepreneurs to spur socio-economic activities. Observations and interviews with the student leader and two other students, and their lecturers revealed that while the top-down approach preferred by the university in engaging students to spur them to become entrepreneurs has its merits, the response at the ground level revealed challenges that they faced in participating in the entrepreneurial event. Findings of the study underscore the importance of narrowing the gap between pedagogical prescriptivism and learner readiness to become entrepreneurs.

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship education, teaching methods, top-down approach, event, university, entrepreneur*

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship education is widely acknowledged by universities around the world as an important field of study (Mwasalwiba, 2010) as entrepreneurs contribute and change society (Harte & Stewart, 2010; Othman & Faridah, 2010). As economies continue to be volatile in the twenty-first century, individuals can no longer solely depend on governments to provide jobs. In fact, undergraduates need to be trained to be self-employed rather than embark on job hunts to serve in government or private sectors that have limited employment. Hence, many countries have recognised the need for self-employment and have integrated entrepreneurship education in undergraduate curricula to perpetuate enterprise culture and eventually enterprising economies.

Due to the perceived socio-economic advantages, entrepreneurship education has been implemented through various approaches to cater for policymakers, academics and students. On one continuum, entrepreneurship education has been strategically prioritised through the implementation of declared policies such as the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative (1994) and Developing Entrepreneurial Graduates: Putting Entrepreneurship at the Centre of Higher Education (2008) (Harte & Stewart, 2010) in the UK.

On the other end of the continuum, entrepreneurship education is offered as optional courses focusing on the fundamentals of entrepreneurship, as is the case in many Iranian universities (Arasti, Falavarjani & Imanipour 2012). Whatever fervour of implementation, a prevailing understanding is that entrepreneurship education can be taught and learned (Mwasalwiba, 2010). Research shows that specific programmes of entrepreneurship education have positive links between classroom teaching and subsequent entrepreneurial success (Dickson, Solomon & Weaver, 2008). This raises a need to understand the learning experience of one of the key stakeholders of entrepreneurship education: students, as current literature lacks in-depth understanding of individual learning experience as they participate in related activities.

On the other hand, relevant literature shows that there is a lack on the definitive issues and theoretical frameworks as practitioners are yet to reach a consensus on how best to approach entrepreneurship education as

the contexts in which related courses are carried out vary. It is not surprising then that various pedagogical approaches, methods and techniques in teaching such courses exist. Mwasalwiba (2010) has attempted to draw an objective overview of the field by focusing on the generic objectives, teaching methods and impact indicators but has not investigated learners themselves who are key stakeholders in such courses. There is a need to know how the implementation of entrepreneurship education impacts their learning experience as the perception is that it is a boon to society. This study offers a microscopic view of the learning experience of a group of three diploma students, particularly the leader of the project, who was tasked to organise an entrepreneurial event as part of their course.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Current trends in literature related to entrepreneurship focus on behavioural or cognitive type of entrepreneurship, converging towards intention-based models instead of new venture creation or personal qualities popular in the 1980s (Mwasalwiba, 2010). Therefore, entrepreneurship programmes at the tertiary level have been generally grouped as educating *for*, *about*, *through* or *in* based on teaching objectives (Mwasalwiba, 2010), approaches, methods and impact assessments (see Co & Mitchell, 2006; Kirby, 2004; Hytti & O’Gorman, 2004). Mwasalwiba (2010) explains that the objectives are specified in terms of what stakeholders intend to achieve which in turn influences the pedagogical approaches. The categories of “for”, “about”, “in” and “through” are explained as thus:

- to educate *for* entrepreneurship means to create an entrepreneur; that is, an individual who is destined to start a new venture. It addresses both the present and potential entrepreneurs with the aim of stimulating the entrepreneurial process, equipping them with the tools to start a business. This is seen as the most desired outcome.
- to learn *about* entrepreneurship is to gain a general understanding about entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. This objective may also include sensitization activities to different stakeholders including policy-makers, financiers and the general public on the role of entrepreneurs in the community.

- to train individuals *in* entrepreneurship aims at making individuals become more entrepreneurial (innovative) in their existing firms or place of work where they take more responsibility of their learning and career life.
- to educate *through* means instructors use new venture creation to help students acquire a range of both business understanding and skills or competences. It seems that educating through entrepreneurship is more of a teaching approach in educating for entrepreneurship than an objective in itself.

Considering the varying objectives in entrepreneurial education, the study investigated the pre-conception of aims of the educational programmes at the selected university by interviewing the course instructors and examining their respective course information. This was to further understand the expected impact of their programmes and selection of teaching methods.

THE CONTEXT

Historical Background

Malaysia has taken a systematic implementation of entrepreneurship programmes since the 70s. The objective was to narrow the economic gap between Malays and non-Malays, specifically the immigrant ethnic Chinese who had settled in Malaya and had a stronghold of the country's economy through various enterprises in tin mines and other trades. The government perceived the economic dominance as an imbalance in the distribution of wealth and sought to address this through the New Economic Policy where policies were drawn to encourage entrepreneurship among Malays. Various government agencies were also formed to perpetuate a culture of entrepreneurship among Malaysians and these include the Ministry of Entrepreneurial Development, MARA, Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Ministry of Rural Development, Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers, Chambers of Commerce, National Entrepreneur Corporation (PUNB), and also Credit Guarantee Corporation (CGC). The effort has intensified in the current era to redress issues of national unity and employment among graduates.

Current Scenario

Entrepreneurship education has been emphasised with renewed rigour in the past two decades as it is perceived to be an instrument in youth development programmes in the nation building agenda. Compared to the pre-independence era where the critical issue was countering a socio-economic imbalance, the current need is addressing unemployment in a globalised world. Graduates who are ready to enter the workforce can no longer be assured a comfortable government job and must be trained to be self-employed before they complete their formal education. In 2000, approximately half of Malaysian youths (2.3 out of 4.37 million) were employed while the rest were in school or were unemployed (Othman & Faridah, 2010). Othman, Hashim and Wahid (2012) investigated the effectiveness of selected entrepreneurship programmes and reported youths lacked planning and management skills, goals and objectives, financial, and problem-solving skills despite being highly interested and motivated in entrepreneurship.

In other words, the Malaysian education system has been also utilised as a channel to nurture, foster and encourage entrepreneurship. In the 9th Malaysian Plan report, universities were required to introduce entrepreneurship education to equip students with the necessary knowledge, skills, ability, attitude, values and cultures (Ahmad, Ramayah & Tuan Muda, 2013). Hence, public universities introduced entrepreneurship as a subject in their curricula while it was taught as an elective in the upper secondary schools. It was perceived that a spirit of entrepreneurship could be fostered among youths while they were at the secondary school and further support could be offered when they transited to the tertiary level. The Ministry of Education acknowledges the efforts of public universities by awarding the prestigious Entrepreneurial University award to the university most prolific in entrepreneurial activities. This emerging trend in the Malaysian university context warrants the need to investigate learners' experience when required to participate in entrepreneurial events as part of their course. The current study sheds some light on what occurs at the ground level where learners are thrust to participate independently in entrepreneurial projects without the intervention of instructors. Findings of the study, although derived from a single event, shed light on the challenges that novice learners face as they need to learn the ropes within the limited timeframe and constrictions of the formal curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

Rationale

Data for the study was collected over one semester, approximately four months. A qualitative case study approach was taken as the objective was to gain insights into the learning experiences of the learners as they went about organising a three-day entrepreneurial carnival. Previous studies carried out in the Malaysian context (e.g. Ahmad, Ramayah & Tuan Muda 2013; Othman & Faridah, 2010) applied quantitative approaches which provided a generalised overview of the phenomenon studied but neglected to mine the individual learning experiences which make the collective. The current study, although a single case study, is warranted as much needs to be known about individuals' learning experience as they are immersed in entrepreneurship education through a formal curriculum enacted by the university; the university itself driven by its entrepreneurial agenda. In other words, this case study unravels the learning experiences of individuals in a top-down teaching curriculum in entrepreneurship education.

The Three-day Entrepreneurial Carnival Event

The entrepreneurial carnival event which had to be carried over three days was compulsory for the semester six Business and Office Management diploma students as the project was part of their coursework which constituted 15% of their overall marks. Although a committee was elected from the two classes of sixty-nine students, the project leader (Sally) and her two coursemates (Nad and Ria) collaborated closely to organise the event as the other committee members did not cooperate. The researcher interviewed and observed the trio as they dealt with tasks that included:

- communicating verbally and in writing with the campus administration in asking permission to organise the event. A thorough proposal on the objectives and funding had to be submitted with the course lecturers' consent,

- informing verbally and in writing to the security unit to cordon the lecturers' parking bay where the event was to be held and to obtain entry passes for the suppliers. A list was submitted with the permission letter obtained from the campus administration,
- dealing with vendors for their own stalls. They also had to ensure that all the groups had "businesses" or they had to help their peers find vendors,
- dealing with the campus infrastructure unit to erect tents and supply tables and chairs,
- segregating the stall area for each group to put up their stalls,
- ensuring a smooth running of the event,
- preparing for the official opening ceremony where the campus head would officially declare open the event. Invitations to those concerned had to be sent out,
- promoting the event via posters and leaflets to the other students and lecturers, and
- cleaning up after the event.

Apart from the three participants, the researcher also interviewed their course lecturers Mr. Lee and Mr. Az for further insights. They revealed that the Business and Office Management faculties collaborated with the university's Entrepreneurial Development unit to organise the event simultaneously at all the branch campuses of the university. The unit focused on promoting entrepreneurial culture among students and could be perceived as being driven by the university agenda in rebranding itself from a teaching to an entrepreneurial university in accordance with the government's effort in producing entrepreneurs. The university has also been acknowledged in the coveted Malaysian Book of Records for the most number of entrepreneurial events organised by a university and this is construed as a milestone in entrepreneurial education.

FINDINGS

Preparation for The Three-day Entrepreneurial Carnival Event

Sally, the project leader, shared that it took them approximately three weeks to prepare for the event. Although there were sixty-nine students in their cohort, she claimed that she and her two coursemates planned and executed all the tasks mentioned above. They also had to find vendors who would do business with them and look for other vendors for groups who were unsuccessful. Marks were awarded for the outcome of the project and empty lots meant less marks. When asked why they had to plan for theirs and for some other groups, Sally reasoned that it was due to the short duration (three weeks) to organise the event which fell in the middle of the semester. Many students could not cope with juggling other coursework and organising the event. It was the first time that they were required to organise a project of that scale independently.

Many students also perceived that the 15% marks allotted for the project did not match the effort to be invested and this discouraged some of them from participating actively at the initial stage as they prioritised other coursework with more weightage. Some preferred to wait until they were given their stalls before getting involved in the project while others turned up on the day of the event to help manage or to make up the crowd. Group members had to take turns at the stalls for a few hours as others attended classes. Sally and her group members had to skip some classes as they had to make arrangements for the event. She shared her experience:

Before that (Day 1 of event) there's a lot of drama, there's a lot of fighting, it was really hard to push them (the other students). Some students did not give cooperation although everyone was involved, the whole batch, the whole part six students. Some of them, even three days before the event, they didn't know what to sell. It was a headache.

When the researcher posed the question of whether students were offered any kind of support, the lecturers replied that they did not intervene in organising the event as it was a student's project. Furthermore, the students would be assessed based on the actualization of the project. They need to

carry out the project independently without any intervention in order to be assessed fairly.

Sally's comments concurred with the lecturers' feedback that the students did not receive any help from the lecturers and that they "were actually on our own" meeting prospective vendors, coming up with the start-up money and in getting the products for their business. Although it was meant to be a team effort, Sally, Nad and Ria had to carry out the preparatory tasks:

I had to make sure, the parking was already closed by Friday. The tents are up.. Had to make sure the lorries with the correct plate number were registered with the security personnel came in.

Moreover, the participants shared that the 15% marks was not enticing enough in getting all the students to participate, and even when they did, not all of them participated with equal vigour and enthusiasm.

Difficulties in Communicating in English Language

Besides the challenges of dealing with everyone involved in the project, as the project leader, Sally had to prepare the official documents in Bahasa Malaysia and some letters to vendors in English Language. She mainly used Bahasa Malaysia when communicating verbally with the university administration but had to switch to English Language when negotiating with vendors. The researcher noted that Sally's responses during the interview reflected her confidence in using both languages. However, she shared that her peers including those who assisted her were not proficient in English Language; therefore, she had to draft all the relevant documents like proposals, letters and invitations, and communicate with the vendors. In one instance, Sally wrote a letter to apply for permission from the security unit.

I had to do a lot of writing... we came up with our own proposal and then we had to send it to the unit keselamatan (security) to close the parking (to put up the tents). We did everything else... there's a lot of work to do, letters written to the person in charge, for the whole batch, group, event.

Due to time constraints, she did not attempt to get other students to help out as she presumed they would be reluctant to do so due to the heavy tasks and course workload. She did not approach the lecturers for help either as they only met them to obtain signatures. Ria added that she could not help Sally in preparing the documents as she was “weak” in her English Language and was reluctant to speak to the vendors. Despite the constraints, the participants unanimously agreed that it was “quite interesting to open up a booth”.

Funding for The Event

Organising the project was particularly difficult for Nad due to the financial constraints it imposed on their student lives. He revealed that students had to come up with their own money as there were no start-up funds given by their faculties. So the students from the same class had to pool their money together in order to carry out the projects in groups. This posed some financial constraints on some students who were beneficiaries of study loans. Although they shared the profits, the initial experience of starting the business was found to be overwhelming. Sally shared that each booth cost RM120 while tents, tables, chairs cost RM670 and the overall cost was shared among the students. A typical booth looked like the one in Figure1.



Figure 1: The students had to rent the tents, banquet tables and chairs to set up their “businesses”

As the project leader, Sally expected some funding to help them set up their “businesses” but was disappointed. When the researcher sought an explanation from their lecturer, Mr. Az, he explained that the students were not given any financial assistance as they were expected to source for their own funds. Organising the event was supposed to inculcate independent learning and entrepreneurship skills besides the application of theories learned in class. The lecturer revealed that at the end of the three-day event, each booth made a gross profit of RM2000-RM3000 which the students shared among themselves.

The Participants' Stalls: The Frozen Yogurt Stall and the Paraphernalia Stall

Initially, Sally and her classmates wanted to sell frozen yogurt but opted for “soft ice-cream”. When questioned about how she knew the vendor and the product, she explained:

Actually we asked around, got his phone number and called. At first, he said frozen yogurt was ok, and after that, the machine could not take it.

They started their business selling flavoured yogurt but the machine broke down on the first day due to extensive usage. They quickly contacted the vendor who replaced it with ice-cream. She believed that the venture was “very successful” due to the tropical humid weather as she and her team had to continuously order boxes of ice-cream from the vendor.

In comparison, Nad and his group set up a booth to sell posters, badges, key-chains and printed t-shirts. The badges, t-shirts and key-chains were especially popular as the students could custom-make the designs. They got the vendor's contact from acquaintances. Unlike the ice-cream venture that required less than RM200 to set up, Nad and his friends spent approximately RM700 to buy their goods which they agreed was “quite high”. Nad shared:

We asked for student prices (for the products) but did not get it. So it was difficult. It was difficult as we couldn't ask for student price.

Although their stall was not as busy as the food stalls, they were kept on their feet by prospective customers. Despite the high cost involved in operating their paraphernalia stall, Nad was satisfied with the outcome of their venture as they made some profit.

Lecturers' and Students' Perception of The Entrepreneurial Event

Despite Mr.Az's and Mr.Lee's perceptions that organising the event was beneficial for students, the participants perceived it to be beneficial "50%-70%" only. Nad remarked that he learned about:

..Personal selling, how to approach customers, how to sell a product, marketing,.. applied what we learned from semester one until now.

Sally concurred that the benefits included learning to prepare for the business world:

We had to be at the booth by eight. We had to open up by nine. We know how to contact people, how to deal with people, how to start up a business.

Ria also agreed that it was an opportunity to use English Language as she sometimes talked to the vendors when accompanying Sally but she did not communicate to her customers in the language. She said that it was a learning opportunity she would not have had had she not participated in the project. However, all the participants agreed that the challenges they encountered were far too overwhelming. Sally commented:

We could not attend classes for three days. We had to be there the whole day. I prefer attending classes than taking care of the booth ... because we had to be there from 9am till 10 pm. the whole time. Some of us did take turns, but some couldn't make it and we were there.

Her comments echoed Ria's who thought the experience was "not helpful" as they only learned "part of it" especially in dealing with people.

When Nad was asked if he would consider “doing this in the future, like marketing”, there was bleak silence. Later, the researcher asked the lecturers if they believed organising the event helped their students learn about entrepreneurship, they replied that the event generally helped the students learn about entrepreneurship and in becoming independent learners. They also had the opportunities to apply the theories they were taught in class.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

- To educate *for* entrepreneurship means to create an entrepreneur; that is, an individual who is destined to start a new venture. It addresses both the present and potential entrepreneurs with the aim of stimulating the entrepreneurial process, equipping them with the tools to start a business. This is seen as the most desired outcome.
- To learn *about* entrepreneurship is to gain a general understanding about entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. This objective may also include sensitization activities to different stakeholders including policy-makers, financiers and the general public on the role of entrepreneurs in the community.
- To train individuals *in* entrepreneurship aims at making individuals become more entrepreneurial (innovative) in their existing firms or place of work where they take more responsibility of their learning and career life.
- To educate *through* means instructors use new venture creation to help students acquire a range of both business understanding and skills or competences. It seems that educating through entrepreneurship is more of a teaching approach in educating for entrepreneurship than an objective in itself.

The aim of this study was to provide insights into individuals' learning experiences as they are immersed in entrepreneurship education within a formal curriculum. Although this study is a single case study based on an entrepreneurial event at a specific site, it is an important one as it sheds light onto individual learning experiences, as literature sorely needs narratives

of what individuals learn and experience as they begin to participate in relevant entrepreneurial activities. Such input is seldom captured through quantitative approaches adopted by existing research as highlighted in the early part of this paper. The participants in this research were involved in their maiden entrepreneurship project and what they experienced unravelled some of the challenges that novices experienced at the point of entry into entrepreneurial activities.

Several inferences could be drawn from the students and lecturers' feedback on the three-day entrepreneurial event held at the campus. The event underscored the importance of carefully designing tasks to allow students with no previous experience to participate by taking "baby-steps" in entrepreneurial events as their initial experience may be overwhelming and turn them away from the target entrepreneurial practices. While it is important to inculcate entrepreneurship culture among youths through entrepreneurship education (Othman & Faridah, 2010), instructors need to be aware that those who do not have the relevant prior experience or do not come from an entrepreneurship culture may lack the motivation to participate. The onus is on the university to take affirmative strategies by creating the appropriate climate to nurture entrepreneurship. Hence, learning *about* (Mwasalwiba, 2010) entrepreneurship in classroom is insufficient to deal with the realities of the entrepreneurial world.

As the findings revealed, the strategies need to include scaffolding such as in apprenticeship (Aronsson, 2004) that would carefully guide and nurture positive outcomes among learners, instead of creating adverse learning experience that may impinge students' interest in entrepreneurship. In other words, to educate students *through* (Mwasalwiba, 2010) entrepreneurial activities where instructors use new venture creations to help students acquire a range of both business understanding and skills or competences is crucial. This seemed to be the approach taken by the instructors but the necessary guidance had not been extended. In fact, the learners perceived participating in the event as being very challenging and exhausting. This concurred with their perception that their efforts and contributions did not match the rewards (15% marks) allocated by the university. Therefore, the university could allocate a more appropriate weightage of marks to match the students' efforts where they should not be made to compromise attending other classes for participating in the events. Hence, there is a need to create

a more sensitive impact indicator of learning and assessment; aspects that have not been fully addressed in entrepreneurship literature.

Instructors need to consciously design one that could complement the programme they are teaching rather than expecting their students to embrace entrepreneurship instantaneously without prior training. The findings of the study revealed that the lack of prior training and solely depending on textbook theories, time constraints and assessment did not prepare the students to deal with the real world challenges that emerged during the event. Instructors, learners, teaching context, learning activities and the outcome form a complex system that must be aligned among course objectives, activities and assessment tasks (Biggs, 1999) with consideration to business discourse for second language learner of English. Hence, there is a need to immerse in learners in entrepreneurship education via a training approach to systematically guide learners into the real world. Ideally, learners should be educated *for* (Mwasalwiba, 2010) entrepreneurship, that is, individuals who are destined to start new ventures. It addresses both the present and potential entrepreneurs with the aim of stimulating the entrepreneurial process, equipping them with appropriate tools to jumpstart a business. In other words, entrepreneurs are not only born but could be nurtured.

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